

# ALEXANDER GOLDSTEIN – HIS LIFE, HIS CHESS PROBLEMS

Compiled by Bob Meadley

## AN ANECDOTAL INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in chess problems during the early 1970s, as a result of solving and analyzing every weekend the Mate in 2 chess problems from Gary Koshnitsky's chess column in the Sydney **Sun Herald**. In 1978, while still a schoolboy, the editor of the chess column from the **Sunday Telegraph**, John Kellner, put me in touch with Bob Meadley, who was then editor of the "Problem Corner" from **Chess in Australia**. With a view to encouraging me to join the British Chess Problem Society, Bob kindly sent me a copy of the February 1978 issue of **Chess in Australia**, which contained Alex's lovely miniature Mate in 4, No.19. It took me ages to find the subtle key; I was deeply impressed. The name Alexander Goldstein was not one that I'd readily forget.

It was not until 1986, however, when my musical pursuits took me to Melbourne, that I first had the opportunity to meet Alex. He warmly invited me to his apartment in Melbourne's Caulfield to discuss matters 'caissaical problemistic'. He and his wife Sophie were both very welcoming and hospitable, with cups of tea and cake being plied on an almost continuous basis. I think that Alex found my height (198 cm, or 6'6") to be rather intimidating, because I still remember him ordering me bluntly to sit down! I showed him a handful of rather traditional two-movers of mine that had been published in the British Chess Problem Society's magazine **The Problemist**, as well as quite a number of long helpmate miniatures I'd composed in 1979 that paraded Black and White excelsiors (i.e., Pawns marching from their home squares all the way to promotion): these had been inspired by a book titled **The Personality of Chess** (1963), by P. L. Rothenberg, who posed a challenge that was later to become known as the \$100 theme – a helpmate in 5 displaying Black and White excelsiors, each ending with a promotion to Knight. (A prize of \$100 was offered to the first person to exhibit this task in an entirely orthodox manner [e.g., without additional, promoted force, or any Fairy conditions]; it remains unsolved to this day...)

Anyway, Alex and I discussed exactly what constitutes an excelsior. We disagreed: Alex's view was that a true excelsior must possess an *uninterrupted* Pawn-march, whereas I thought that this did not matter. I also recall that Alex regarded such helpmates, contrary to the prevailing view held by most problemists since the Piran Conference of the late 1950s formally decreed helpmates to be "orthodox", as a type of Fairy-chess problem. Although he was by no means averse to composing some genuine Fairies and helpmates himself, I'll never forget Alex's colourful characterization of such genres – "spice in the kitchen". In other words, his view was that direct-mate chess problems were the core genre of chess-problem composition, with Fairies merely adding some 'extra flavour', as an ornamental genre. (How times have changed: whilst Alex's view might have had some validity during the mid 20th century, it certainly is not the case now!) So Alex encouraged me to compose more direct-mates – particularly longer direct-mates, where one might stand a much better chance of avoiding anticipations.

Alex's opinions on chess problem matters were, I must say, extremely conservative – in lockstep with those of some of his Soviet friends, such as Evgeny Umnov. His particular *bête noire* was chess problems that intentionally contained more than one solution, or (thematic) duals / multiples – although set-play and twins, particularly in helpmates, were, in his judgement, permissible. This anachronistic viewpoint is reflected both in Alex's apparently somewhat controversial Lecture Report published in the July 1969 issue of **The Problemist** (see below), and in the brief letter he wrote to **The Problemist** appended immediately below this Introduction. (The letter also flaunts Alex's bright wit, as well as a certain gift for acerbic sarcasm! Alex gave me some old issues of the Dutch chess-problem magazine **Probleemblad**. Liberally sprinkled throughout were his one-word dismissals of particular problems with expressions such as "Pfui!" and "Shit", although one problem – a long reflexmate by Gerd Rinder – did earn his admiration: "Worth the price of the whole magazine!".) It turns out, fortunately, that Alex's prognosticatory 'Chicken Little alarmism' has not resulted in any chess-compositional dystopia, and the art-form – particularly with the advent of affordable computer-testing and -analysis – thrives at least as much as it ever did.

Until his untimely death in 1988 (after routine surgery), I had little further contact with Alex. This was on no account due to any kind of falling-out between us; rather, my university studies allowed me little time to pursue chess-problem composition. I do remember sending some correspondence to and from Alex to Norman Macleod in order to help Norman with the writing of Alex's obituary, and that Alex proposed I become a Fellow of the British Chess Problem Society, which I duly did in 1988 (and have remained so ever since).

I conclude with a delicious irony. Alex would have been absolutely horrified to learn that I have become one of the world's leading exponents of the two-mover separation theme known as "combinative separation" (first shown by T. R. Dawson as long ago as 1947!) – whereby multiple threats are filtered through every combination within the variation play: in short, those dreaded multiples and duals! (I wonder what Alex might have thought about my penchant for series-movers as well...)

Dr Ian Shanahan (7 May 2016).